

China

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China: The National Political Scene



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Deng Xiaoping's political skills, network of supporters, and dogged persistence have, in the seven years since the death of Mao Zedong, markedly altered the political, economic, and social landscape of China. His most urgent concern is to promote a new generation of leaders and ensure the primacy of General Secretary Hu Yaobang in the party and Premier Zhao Ziyang in the state apparatus. Neither of these proteges is totally secure in his post; both must continue to broaden their power bases.

Changing the Guard

Deng wants to strengthen Hu and Zhao by removing officials who are viewed as impediments to Dengist reforms. The first phase of a shakeup in provincial party and government leadership, completed late last spring, complemented similar earlier measures at the national level. Both central and local reorganizations promoted officials who are generally younger, better educated, and technically more proficient--putative reformists who are the greatest potential source of support for Hu and Zhao. Hu especially has succeeded in emplacing reliable allies in critical party positions.

Another key step in the changing of Beijing's political guard will come this winter, when the party begins a sweeping "rectification" campaign. In addition to advancing the succession prospects of Hu Yaobang, Deng and his allies expect the campaign to advance several other interrelated ends:

- Expelling the party's least reliable members, such as those who were involved in the excesses of the Cultural Revolution or who refuse to support reform plans.

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- Imposing a degree of ideological uniformity based on writings of Deng and other senior party leaders who share a reformist outlook.
- Repairing the party's public image--tarnished in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution by such problems as cadre corruption and official abuses of power--by promoting the achievements of Chinese Communism and rejuvenating the party's membership.

Deng's Opponents

Despite great personal power, Deng cannot dictate his will in the highest policy deliberations. Although there are no clear-cut factional splits within the central leadership, some senior party leaders have opposed one or several of Deng's initiatives. Few, if any, oppose the entire policy package. In general, Deng's opposition is not an organized clique offering a coherent set of policy alternatives but is rather a loose and shifting coalition that varies from issue to issue. In practice, key leaders who have reservations about elements of Deng's program generally have been flexible enough to recognize and accept compromise measures.

At the risk of simplification, we identify two general types among Deng's critics: "traditionalists" and "leftists." Many traditionalists are of modest worker or peasant origin and recognize their long careers are jeopardized by the emphasis on youth and expertise. Other traditionalists are more sophisticated and technocratic in orientation and generally prefer stronger central controls than have been the case under the reforms.

Chinese "leftists" are a dying breed who made their careers during the Cultural Revolution and have managed to resist attempts to dislodge them from positions of responsibility. The leftist label applies to those who generally oppose Deng's reforms out of identification with now discredited Maoist policies and practices. The Chinese media continue to decry the leftist presence at lower administrative levels and in the military.

Reformers and Reforms

The entire leadership is committed to modernizing China but differences remain over priorities, methods, and the definition of modernization. Deng's followers, who are generally described as "reformers," share a vision of a politically stable, economically prosperous China, led by a rejuvenated Communist party that includes a greater percentage of China's educated elite than in the past. Deng accordingly has sought to:

- Staff streamlined party, state, and military bureaucracies with younger, better educated officials.

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- Create orderly political procedures and legal structures that will prevent a small group from disrupting the entire polity.
- Raise living standards by relaxing state controls on the economy and introducing material incentives.
- Create a leaner, more professional, and less political military.
- Separate party from government functions, allowing skilled professionals to implement policy set by the party.
- Loosen some restraints on individual conduct, permitting a greater diversity of life and greater cultural and intellectual freedom.

Just how vigorously the reformers pursue their program depends on how the reforms affect the party's ability to rule. If party primacy--and, therefore, the reformers' legitimacy--is jeopardized by the new measures, past practice suggests that the reformers will swiftly quash the threat. China's commitment to a socialist system along Marxist-Leninist lines is fixed.

While seeking to reconcile these differences in the leadership, the Chinese continue to grope for solutions to important ideological issues. Party traditionalists are especially troubled by recent inroads of Western values and attitudes and call for more attention to political indoctrination. The ideas of Mao Zedong--China's guiding ideology since since 1945--have become increasingly irrelevant to present concerns, and Beijing has so far been unable to devise a convincing substitute. The recent campaign to absorb the notions of Deng Xiaoping, however, marks the most important attempt thus far to redefine Chinese ideology for the 1980s and beyond.

The party seeks to enlist the support of intellectuals behind its plans by offering them material preferment, publicizing their leading role in the modernization effort, and coopting them into local and central leadership groups. This remains a controversial policy: a small elite among writers and artists have produced works catering to a more sophisticated audience that ignore--or worse, challenge--party supremacy. Some party old-timers resent the abandonment of Maoist policies that suppressed the growth of an intellectual elite.

After Deng

If Deng were to die today, his political heir, Hu Yaobang, would not automatically be assured of maintaining his party primacy. Although Hu's position has strengthened considerably over the past two years, he does not enjoy the political

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resources available to Deng and appears to have only thin support among conservative party and military elders.

Hu nevertheless has assets that no other leader of his generation can claim. He has served as the party's nominal leader for two years and has steadily developed this advantage by appointing political allies to high level posts. He is closely identified with the reform of the party bureaucracy, and a successful house-cleaning during the coming rectification may provide a clear policy success for which he can take credit while stepping out of Deng's shadow.

In our view, following Deng's demise Hu's most pressing problem would be to hold the reform coalition together and to maintain the appearance of a strong political center. He has a natural reservoir of support among those senior civilian and military officials whose interests are staked to reforms initiated under Deng. Short of an egregious blunder by Hu, we believe that the party leadership would be inclined to stick with him following Deng's death and, forgoing a tumultuous succession struggle, continue along the general policy lines demarcated by Deng.



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